



THE MUSICAL ACTIVITIES DURING THE PRE-DYNASTIC AND EARLY PERIOD IN EGYPT

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Abstract:

This paper examines some various archaeological sources related to music and dance activities during the Pre-dynastic and early period in Egypt. And by selecting those sources from different areas in Egypt, a descriptive analysis can help better understand the studied music and dancing representations, while the comparative study here may help reaching a clear conclusion about the connection of those early representations with those from the later periods in Egypt. Some of the various sources studied here, do confirm the existence of musical and dance performances in the different aspects of the daily life and funerary rituals since then, while others highlight a wider documentation of dancer's activities compared to those of singers' and musicians', of which only a few have been documented. Through the different studied sources documenting musical and dancing activities from pre- and early dynastic societies in Egypt, their important function and role can be suggested.

Keywords:

Early dynastic
ib3
Pre-dynastic
Oxford palette
Mace-head
Naqqada
Dancers

1. Introduction

While much academic study focuses more on the description of many musical scenes of the old, middle, and new kingdom, few scholarly articles focus on the existence of musical and dance performances in earlier times. However, one should not neglect Garfinkel's very detailed studies of prehistoric dance activities Garfinkel, which provides detailed description and analysis from several artefacts from many civilizations in the Levant, while only little attention has been given of those prehistoric dance activities in Egypt [1]. Important studies to be mentioned and highlighted here, are those of Quibell [2], Griffith [3], Capart [4] and Petire [5]. Furthermore, several specialists have dealt with different archeological finds [6] in separate research works [7], for example those studies

studying the prehistoric clay vessels in Egypt [8]. Therefore, this scholarly article tackles precisely the different and variable finds related to music or dance activities from predynastic and early Egypt all together in one study, in an attempt to relate them to the documented music and dance activities of later eras in Egypt. This connection could also clarify and suggest the origin of some musical performances.

2. Methodological Study

In this article, four scientific methods are used: a) Iconographic method: to give an accurate description and analyzation for certain finds related to music and dance activities. b) Philological method: to trace the name of those activities and connect it

to the later naming. **c) Comparative method:** to compare the different representations of musical and dancing activities in the aim to highlight the compatibility and the differences. **d) Various archaeological sources:** whether statues, clay pots, stone fragments, figurines and others, in order to prove the existence of music and dance activities during the prehistoric and early period in Egypt. An Overview of the musical activities during the predynastic and early dynasty period of Egypt and its neighboring civilizations. Egypt has been a Nile oasis since the Stone Age, developing a base for the emergence and development of all kinds of civilizations almost 10,000 years ago. This natural wealth helped Egypt to rapidly evolve from prehistoric settlements to a highly sophisticated civilization. The socio-economic relationships with neighboring civilizations in the Levant can be traced by hundreds of discovered clay vessels [9] dating back to the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC. While Jansen-Winkel did believe that during the prehistoric times, Egypt was surrounded by illiterate barbarians from the neighboring civilizations [10], Riethmüller & Zaminer [11] did believe that Mesopotamia, Egypt's neighboring culture, was highly cultivated and had practiced some musical activities as well and confirmed it by depicting a cuneiform-tablet (about 3000 B.C.) with a script including an angular harp instrument, fig. (1), a probable pictorial symbol, which may indicate the existence of archaic music activities there, even earlier than the oldest documented in Egypt.



Figure (1) Shows cuneiform tablet from Uruk culture in early Mesopotamia, 3000 B.C, with a harp as a pictorial symbol, Vorderasiens Museum Berlin, No.15061 [11].

From many diverse finds that has been discovered from the predynastic and early dynasty cultures in the northern parts of Egypt, like Merimde Bani Salama, El Omari and Buto [12]. and others in the southern parts of Egypt, like Badari and Naqqada cultures [13], one can prove some socio-economic relationships with the Levant since the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC. Those finds do mainly include hundreds of clay potteries discovered in tombs from the Um El Qaab cemetery in Abydos [9] (Abydo's tomb U239) [14], which often include decorations with several scenes related to music and dance activities [12]. The archaeological sources related to some musical activities from the predynastic and early dynasties period in Egypt are:

### 2.1. Pottery vessels

On a pottery vessel from El Amrah one can see a female figure with raised or curled hands [3], which are sometimes analyzed as a figure in a dancing pose with castanet in their hands [4]. Although not a single actual music instruments from prehistoric eras have been discovered in Egypt yet, one can assume their existence back then. French musicologist Laviganc [15] documented several dancing representations on pottery vessels from upper Egypt, where female dancers are probably accompanied by male figures, who are beating the rattles, to keep the beat and rhythm for the dancers, fig. (2-a). Many of Pertie's discovered potteries do also have decorations of dancing like figures, fig. (2-b) [16].

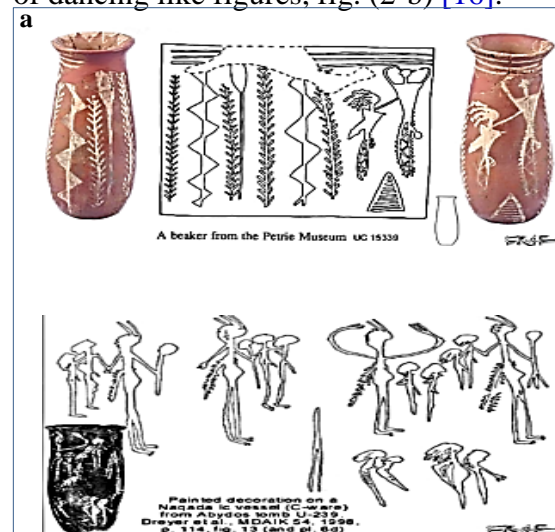




Figure (2) Shows **a.** clay vase decoration showing dancing human figures; (left) clay pot, Petrie museum, No. UC 15339, (right) Naqqada I. C-ware; Abydo's tomb U239, **b.** human representations on a Naqqada pottery vessel, El Amrah in upper Egypt (Left) British Museum, EA 35502. (Right) [4].

## 2.2. Rock graffiti

Some several predynastic rock graffiti of musical activity, spreading across the eastern desert and parts of the southwestern Sahara have been discovered [7]. Some show human representations [17] similar to those from the Naqqada pottery vessels with raised and curved hands, fig. (3-a) [18]. Those graffiti dancers were probably associated with ritual or funerary practices in early societies, indicating the important function and role of music and dance activities during this time [19]. Another graffiti from the Eastern desert shows a group of five human figures with long hair together with a figure depicted on a boat with raised arms, fig. (3-b) [20]. Scholars have not been able to agree on the gender of these figures [21], but yet agree that music and dance performances did have an actual function, apart from its magical and/or religious role [4].

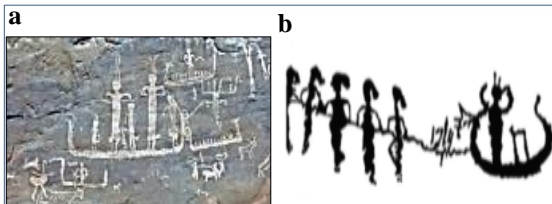


Figure (1) Shows **a.** a rock graffiti from Wadi Abu Wasil with a dancing male figure [22], **b.** rock graffiti of a human figures with raised arms on a boat [25].

## 2.3. Seal impression

Some early dynastic seal impressions from Elephantine [22] and others from El Kab in

Upper Egypt [12] (Tomb No. 160/H3 [23], Naqqada III a2-b), fig. (4) may also provide another glimpse of actual music and dance performances in the daily life of the earlier Egyptians [24].



Figure (4) Shows cylinder seal impression from a predynastic tomb No. 160, Helwan [24].

## 2.4. Tomb scenes

Klebs wrote that the earliest surviving musical representations come from the wall scenes of tomb No.100 [2], discovered by Quibell in 1902 at Hierakonpolis [25]. He describe one of the scenes in this tomb as a figure that appear to be dressed in leopard skin, fig. (5) similar to those resembling the ceremonial cloths worn by the priests later [2].



Figure (5) Shows tomb No. 100 in Hierakonpolis with some estimated dance scenes [34].

## 2.5. Unidentified mace-head (may belong to King Scorpion)

The so-called Scorpion mace-head [26] (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford [4]) depicts in its middle register on the left, three dancers (either male or female, not clear enough) with a long hanging strand of hair braided down the back, fig. (6) who are probably attending a royal ceremony [27], and who are pictured here with their legs raised and apparently clapping [28], gestures that are mostly related to dancing poses [29].

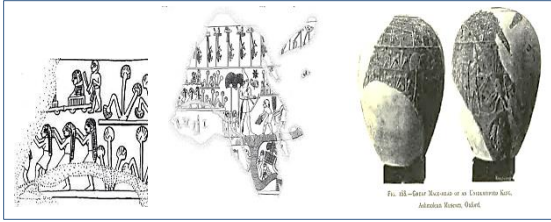


Figure (6) Shows a mace-head for dancing women with clapping hands [29].

## 2.6. King Narmer mace-head

Another mace-head belonging to king Narmer shows three bearded male figures, probably in a dancing gesture with their feet off the ground and hands over their hearts [4], fig. (7-a). This may be related to the term *ib3* [30], that as a symbol of a heart and has been translated as “a dance” [4]. In front of and behind those dancers are three crescent-shaped objects, fig. (7-b) which have been suggested as some sort of title for certain officials [30]. It can refer to a symbol or name of a certain dance or dancer [31]. Although textual evidence of music or dancing activities are not available from predynastic period in Egypt, this pictorial sign on the Narmer mace-head may suggest the origin of the term *ib3* [32], that has been identified with dancing gestures in many dancing scenes of the old kingdom. However, through occasional references from later literature or administrative documents, more can be learned about the musicians, their lives and their activities in ancient Egypt [33].

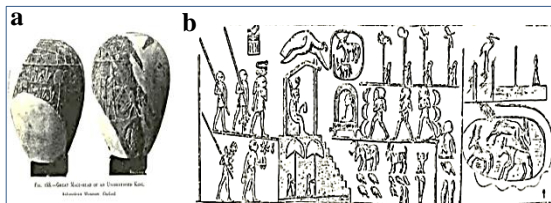


Figure (7) Shows a. king Narmer mace-head from the Ashmolean museum in Oxford illustrates three male dancing figures, b. dancing figure on a fragment of a mace head from Hierakonpolis, early period [39].

## 2.7. Pottery fragment

An early dynastic pottery fragment depicts a bearded dancer with Asiatic facial features holding a heart-shaped vessel, probably presenting a gift to the ruler [4]. The heart

shaped vessel [34], together with his raised leg and arm reminds of the pictorial sign and code of the term *ib3* dance are interpreted, fig. (8) [31]. This fragment can be considered as a possible evidence for the existence of cultic dances [35] in early times in ancient Egypt [33] as well as foreign dancer since the predynastic era in Egypt.



Figure (8) Shows a probably dancing dwarf on a fragment of an early dynastic mace-head from Hierakonpolis, early period [43].

## 2.8. The Oxford palette

Another archaeological source to be mentioned here is the Oxford palette in the Ashmolean museum, which according to some musicologists may document the oldest depicted flute in the ancient Egyptian history, fig. (9) [19]. Capart's referred the donkey-headed figure here to a standing jackal its legs while playing the flute, a kind of fantasy representation [4]. Petrie has a similar opinion [36], while Quibell did agree that depicted Instrument here may be the earliest presentation of a wind instrument in Egypt [37]. Other researchers went into further analysis and suggested that this form of instrument was known as the *seba* or *seby* in later ancient Egyptian history [38].



Figure (9) Shows the Oxford palette with the donkey-shaped figure playing the flute. (Ashmolean museum, Oxford Palette, Nr. AN 1896-1908 E.3924.

## 2.9. Figurines

A small primitively shaped clay figure with two simple holes for the eyes and a crude necklace has been excavated in an unknown region in Egypt [39] (OIM, E10543), and dates to the Predynastic period, fig. (10-a). Other small figurines also dating back to the early dynastic period represent dancing dwarf figures were discovered in Tell El Farkha. One of those is a small statue made of ivory that has been interpreted as a dancer, who may resemble the participating dancers in a king ceremony relevant to the *hb sed* one, while being sculptured in a dancing gesture, fig. (10-b) [40]. Another worth mentioning source here are those small figurines of women with raised arms and cured hands, who have been interpreted by some specialists as mourning women [41]. These are published in the Cairo museum catalogue in 1986 as small female dolls and as seductively naked and tattooed dancers, whose eternal task was to entertain and satisfy all sexual needs of the deceased in his afterlife [42]. Other specialists categorize them as dancers [43].



Figure (10) Shows **a**, a clay figurine of a harp player from the Predynastic period in Egypt. (OIM, E10543), **b**, a dancing dwarf figurine made of ivory, early dynastic period [57], **c**, female figurines from the predynastic period in Egypt. (Left) Brooklyn museum, Nr. 07.447.505. (Right) Boston museum.

## 2.10. Two Hierakonpolis' mummies

Two discovered mummies at the Nubian C-group cemetery in Hierakonpolis (HK27C) [44] have been identified as predynastic se-

minude dancers of Nubian origin, who have geometric-shaped dotted tattoos on their bodies, fig. (11-a) [45], similar to a tattoo motif shown on acrobatic dancers, fig. (11-b) [46]. The ostraca Nr. 2868 from Deir El Medina [47] is a good example here (IFAO VA 2868) [48].

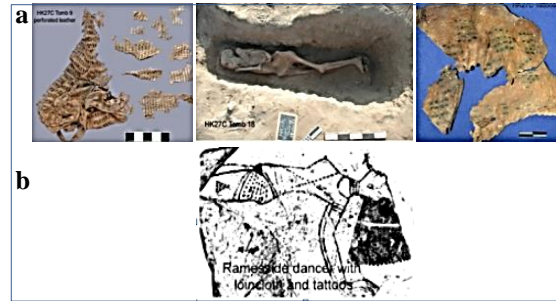


Figure (11) Shows **a**, remains of tattooed skin from a dancer, Hierakonpolis. (HK27c), **b**, ostraca with a tattooed dancer, Deir El Medina [48].

## 3. Results

Based on the different archaeological sources been studied here, one can define the musical and dancing performances as activities that has been integrated in several life aspects and may have been related to the funerary rites since then. While several of these sources do depict dancing figures in different context, only very few ones document musicians or musical activities. Whether this may indicate a wider spread of dancing activities compared to singing and musical activities, this is still an open questions that needs more studies in future.

## 4. Discussions

The diverse archaeological sources studied here can assure the participation of women as well as men in the music and dancing activities since the pre-dynastic era in Egypt. And through comparing those different finds with each other, one can state the fact, that figures with raised arms and curved hands has been repeatedly documented in different places, sources and materials. This may lead to presume, that these dances were widely practiced in Egypt, an assumption that may contradict with classifying these societies as barbaric ones during this ear.

## 5. Conclusion

Although pre- and early dynastic societies in Egypt are sometimes seen as primitive, many archaeological sources of musical and dance activities may provide opposite or at least different insights on this subject. The discovered sources from Upper and Lower Egypt differ in terms of materials and elements, and may give a fair idea of some music and dance activities. By trying to relate, distribute, compare and evaluate these discoveries with each other, a better picture of those activities can be formed. This study can also help to note the association of those initial musical and dance activities with later documented scenes from tombs and temples of the old, middle, and new kingdoms.

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